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## **(In)visibility, privilege and the performance of whiteness in Brexit Britain: Polish migrants in Britain's shifting migration regime**

### **Introduction**

This intervention explores the experiences of Polish nationals in Britain in the context of the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership (Brexit vote) campaign and result. Using the testimonies of Polish nationals in Britain we reflect on how whiteness is lived and felt in circumstances of raised anti-immigrant sentiment, before connecting these experiences to wider discussions concerning mobility privilege and the broader structural racisms and legacies that shape the discourse and governance of migration. Ultimately, we show how the Polish case-study, in light of Brexit, illuminates the human, complex, often contradictory and always racialised contexts of Britain's migration regime.

### **Whiteness and Polish Nationals in the UK: The Limits of an 'Invisible' Identity and the Erosion of Privileged Status**

The Brexit vote, and the volume and nature of anti-Polish sentiment which preceded and followed it (Krupa, 2016), offers an important reminder that being white, even with all the privilege it does confer, can sometimes offer only limited protection against anti-immigrant agitation and migration regime insecurity. This raises new questions about how we might engage with the concept of whiteness. From its foundational roots in the work of W.B. DuBois (1935) Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (1989), academic scholarship on whiteness has grown rapidly over the past 20-30 years, and is now in its 'third wave' iteration (Twine and Gallagher, 2008; (for further reviews see Fine et al., 1997; Nayak, 2007; Steyn and Conway, 2010; Garner, 2017). This body of work has advanced an understanding of whiteness as a structure, a discourse and a 'problematic' from which to analyse social relations (Garner, 2007:3). Whiteness, Linke, (1999) argues, is always constructed in relation to, and superior to, other identities, as an ever-present marker of perceived supremacy and domination. It is a space invader (Puwar, 2004; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000), an 'omnipresent' (McGuinness, 2000: 226) and 'mythical norm' (Lorde, 1984), yet invisible for those who 'inhabit it' (Ahmed, 2004; Jackson, 1998). There is a strong emphasis on the time-space contingency and malleable nature of whiteness (see Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 2005),

suggesting a hierarchy of 'shades' of whiteness where the relational aspects of identity ensure that some groups are deemed to be whiter than others (Garner, 2007; McDowell, 2009). As Twine and Gallagher argue (2008, 7), academic understandings of whiteness have matured to the point that studies now explore the 'nuanced and locally specific ways in which whiteness as a form of power is defined, deployed, performed, policed and reinvented', and the relational, contextual and situational nature of white privilege, including that which is taken for granted, ignored or 'perceived as a source of victimisation' (*ibid.* 7). In their study of 'White Americans', for example, Warren and Twine (1997) argue that the boundaries of whiteness are expanding in the US as 'non-black' immigrant groups who self-position as white challenge the boundaries of 'the colour line'. If this category of whiteness can be expanded in certain situations, it can also be contracted; many immigrant groups in contemporary Europe are positioned as 'not quite white' through a range of discursive practices in public, media and politics.

We argue that Polish migrant experiences in Brexit Britain offer an important prism through which to view the various (in)visibilities and performativities of whiteness, and we discuss this here using testimonies from Polish nationals before and after the Brexit result. The specifically racialised position of Eastern Europeans in the UK has already been receiving attention. Fox et al. (2012) argue that 'new Europeans' from East-Central Europe (ECE) have become racialized subjects in the UK, but positioned as 'inbetween', on the one hand economically marginalised in the labour market, while on the other racially privileged through their white identity (see Parutis, 2011), and we can add to this legally privileged through their EU national status.<sup>1</sup> Garner (2018) sees the position of Eastern Europeans after the Brexit vote as one of hierarchy-in-progress, nominally racialized as white yet subject to exclusionary attacks. He makes a comparison with Roediger's (1991) study of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century European migrants in the USA to show their relational positioning in the complex social relations encountered through migration. For Eastern Europeans in the UK, these notions of hierarchies and 'inbetweenness' also force us to confront the postcolonial power dynamics within Europe vis-a-vis the relational positioning of north/west Europe and

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<sup>1</sup> Our aim here is not to re-centre whiteness or to conceal racism (cf. Bonnett, 2000). Similarly, we do not intend to reproduce essentialist categories nor place white experience at the centre of intellectual inquiry – it is our aim to make connections and find differences between processes of racialisation that take place within European migration regimes.

its 'backward', exotic eastern other (Buchowski, 2006; Burrell, 2011) - a perpetual trope in British culture, literature and film (Korte et al, 2010). Importantly, this is an othering which is anchored in geopolitical imaginaries as well as racialised, class intersectionalities. This resonated in an interview undertaken by (author B) with 'Julia', shortly after 2004:

I feel like I am coming from a poor country. They are not very sympathetic, and they speak to you very loud, thinking that you don't speak very good English. And people ask you if there are any polar bears in Poland, twice I have had this question, 'is it true that there are polar bears in Poland?' Yeah, in the zoo. It kind of puts you off meeting people because you have to explain, there are very few people who actually know something about Poland, have been to Poland.

Similarly, in research with Italians in post-Brexit referendum UK, Mazilli and King (2017) found that some respondents placed themselves within a hierarchy of Europeanness, with Italians ahead of 'Slavs' and Turks'. If Poles sit in an 'inbetween' locus in the UK, these orientalist hierarchies are in play too - more 'western' than Commonwealth or Middle Eastern populations, but not as western as other, nearer, Europeans.

These complex, sometimes shaky, constructed hierarchies challenge the assumed invisibility of white migrants in the UK. While Linke (1999:27) can argue that whiteness is 'disassociated from physicality', other studies have punctured the notion that European migrants in Britain automatically inhabit a certain invisibility 'on the ground' (Rzepnikowska, 2015). If, as Colic-Piesker (2005:622) argues, whiteness is also about 'class, status, language and other features of the individual that can be discerned in social interaction', then there are clearly many facets of daily life where European migrants' visibility is potentially elevated.

It is here we can see, drawing on research undertaken with Polish nationals in Scotland (first author) in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, how particular white bodies are surfaced and made visible in the context of political and legal uncertainty and anti-immigrant sentiment. Dorota has lived in Scotland for 12 years, and she and her Spanish husband, Pedro, have two children.

Since we live here we have to take, I have to take buses more often...And I don't like to talk to [my children] in Polish because this, I have, maybe it's my, it's my head again, but I have, sometimes I am being looked at...But certainly I, I think there was a few moments like that where I felt what previously [before the referendum] did not alert anyone to pay attention to me... misbehaviour of a child being, you know, talked to in a foreign language does evoke certain nodding, huffing, or you know like, rolling eyes and stuff.

Since the Brexit vote Dorota does not recognise whiteness as a mask of protection and feels marginalised and marked as an outsider in her everyday interactions with others. She changes her behaviour on public transport, minimising her foreignness by not speaking Polish, a strategy to detach herself from the stigma associated with the Polish 'migrant worker' (cf. Ryan, 2010). Dorota's husband, Pedro, also spoke about the 'targeting' of Polish nationals since the Brexit vote, compared to his own experience as a 'less visible' Spaniard. So, what is Dorota negotiating here that is an impact of Brexit? The intensification of anti-immigrant sentiment among a general public leading to heightened visibility as an outsider? The threat of being seen through the lens of migration silences Dorota, she minimises her difference, and is confronted with a kind of temporary 'double consciousness'; of 'looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (DuBois, 1994:2).

Helena moved to Scotland in 2006 and has recently become a British citizen. She explains here some of her conflicting emotions about Britain following the Brexit vote:

I think it created this artificial kind of border...or limit between us and them. And I never felt it before and now I feel like I'm them and not, you know, us.  
...And I have an accent. Whenever I speak someone will hear that I'm a foreigner. I never felt ashamed of it or anything like that but now, you know, you open your mouth and you don't know whether someone will react to it... I never thought that I'd have to do defend myself.

The references to 'us' and 'them' shift as she explains her sense of abandonment, betrayal and disbelief - she had never before expected to defend herself from offensive comments as

a white migrant in a predominantly white country (cf. McDowell, 2009; Cook, Dwyer and Waite, 2011). She feels angry at British people and politicians for rejecting her compliance and enthusiasm for making Britain her home, and is stung by the sudden shift in the politics of belonging towards new racialized hierarchies. Helena's racial consciousness is at once raised and threatened as she realises she is an identifiable 'migrant', no longer protected by her white identity, signalling a loss of power (Frankenburg, 1993).

These experiences are further encapsulated in Maria's testimony. Maria moved to Edinburgh in 2005, is single with one child.

I was angry, I was anxious... I was quieter after Friday. In a weird way, you know, I felt like maybe I shouldn't just talk because my accent is going to tell them that I am foreign... [I] never thought that a time would come when this type of racism, xenophobic comments would be acceptable again. Not only in the private life, in the public life. And that's the scary bit.

Here she talks about her anxiety and strategies of self-silencing after the vote. She expresses a feeling of paralysis and disbelief at the channeling of xenophobia towards her. Racism is a new experience that she hadn't previously encountered in such potency and she feels a sense of outrage. Furthermore, we see the emergence of a new future orientated insecurity, unsettling the life she has built.

### **Overcoming mobility binaries**

These experiences raise some difficult questions in the wider context of the Brexit vote and the racial, and racist, dynamics of Britain's migration regime. It is impossible to consider the exposure of EU migrants to racism without simultaneously acknowledging the ongoing racism and discrimination experienced by the BAME population within this climate. It is equally difficult to think about the new more vulnerable status of EU migrants without acknowledging the struggles and uncertainties that the larger migrant population has been enduring whilst navigating Britain's 'hostile environment', long before Brexit, something currently being exemplified by the Conservative government's treatment of the children of the 'Windrush generation'. However inflected the whiteness of Polish migrants has been, as Garner (2007: 66) points out, 'not being white, and being black are two very different

things'. Being part of the EU mobility regime, and being outside of it, have, similarly translated into starkly differentiated experiences. Emejulu (2016) argues strongly that there is a responsibility that comes with the new 'outrage' against racism against white EU nationals:

*"What does it mean that those who now are expressing 'concern' about a surge in xenophobia have previously had little to say about everyday and institutionalised racism and violence that people of colour experience? And that people of colour were not taken at our word, as others have been, about what we experience? It seems some people are only concerned with racism and xenophobia when their own privileged migration status is challenged."*

It has to be acknowledged that perhaps even more than being white, being an EU national has afforded Poles in the UK a legal privilege that, up to now, has shaped experiences of integration and arguably offered protection from some of the harshest aspects of being a migrant in the UK. It is also important to remember that however vitriolic anti-Polish sentiment has become, some of these migration-orientated Brexit discussions did not limit themselves to insinuations about Eastern European workers as wage depressing, resource draining eastern others. Sights were always set on the external borders of the EU, and, for example, the spectre of Turkish nationals coming to Britain in the event of further EU enlargement (see [voteleave.uk](http://voteleave.uk) campaign posters). The timing of the referendum campaign, which ran concurrently with heightened concern about the 'refugee crisis', also worked to underline the multifaceted nature of the desire to control borders - not only against 'co-Europeans', but also against refugees seeking safety in the UK having travelled into and across Europe. The scripting of the acceptable and non-acceptable (Ford, 2011), deserving and undeserving migrants (Dhaliwal and Fokert, 2015) - or perhaps more accurately, the non-acceptable, and the even less acceptable migrants - in these campaigns elides the diverse experiences, subjectivities and positionalities of different mobile actors and ultimately distracts from addressing the structural and historical inequalities that set up these binaries in the first place. The Brexit vote may have partially reflected unease about 'Eastern European migrant workers', but it also held a mirror to, and amplified, wider and deeply entrenched, and often thinly disguised Islamophobic and racist, concerns about the EU's ability to keep these more othered others out - to disengage Britain from a Fortress

Europe which was becoming too porous to those from beyond it. As Garner (2018) notes, formal political campaigns that script immigration and Islam as an antagonism to British culture reflect a mainstreaming of white supremacy, in that racist ideas and assumptions are increasingly part of mainstream discussions on politics.

### **Final Thoughts**

We make three key points to conclude our discussion. First, that the experiences of Polish migrants after Brexit underline both the complexities of racial hierarchies and individual vulnerabilities in the face of geopolitical shifts and their aftermath. The fallout from the campaign and the ongoing haggling over the rights and status of EU nationals wreaks a fundamentally human cost - new insecurities, performances and visibilities, played out in day-to-day lives, through relationships, workplaces, public spaces and internalised anxieties. Being white does not offer immunity from this but the 'walls of whiteness' offer some shelter (cf. Ahmed, 2014). Putting these experiences into a wider context does not detract from this pain, and the enormity of the shift that many people are now feeling exposed to and lost within. But secondly, this wider context must be taken into view. The Brexit Leave campaign repeatedly used implied colonial discourses to set the UK up as a country apart; racial violence spiked in its aftermath; and non-EU migrants and refugees from all backgrounds and across Europe have been facing a migration regime increasingly designed to make them feel unwelcome, to hold them in limbo and to encourage their 'return. While some of this impetus is hardly limited to the UK context, this is what EU migrants in the UK now face - a new experience of re-bordering which will challenge all over again these assumptions of Europeanness, whiteness and belonging. In the 'outrage' that accompanies these journeys, it is imperative to find new solidarities with those who have already been, and continue to travel this path.

Finally, we highlight the value of critical whiteness studies to analyse more broadly how Brexit, and its underlying anti-liberal populism, is shaping understanding of race, privilege and power. While we are mindful of perpetuating whiteness a central referent in discussions of Brexit (see Bhabra, 2018), we can also see that using a critical whiteness lens to analyse contemporary international migration to Europe allows us to not only consider how racial boundaries are set and reshaped in different historical contexts (Twine and Gallagher, 2008:



7), but also expose the continued contradictions and 'inflections' of whiteness as a form of identity and a system of power.

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